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Soviet Policy Toward the West: The Gorbachev Challenge

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National Intelligence Estimate

Key Judgments

*These Key Judgments represent the views
of the Director of Central Intelligence
with the advice and assistance of the
US Intelligence Community.*

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***The following intelligence organizations participated
in the preparation of these Key Judgments:***

The Central Intelligence Agency

The Defense Intelligence Agency

The National Security Agency

The Bureau of Intelligence and Research,
Department of State

The Intelligence Division, Federal Bureau of Investigation

also participating:

The Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army

The Director of Naval Intelligence, Department of the Navy

The Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, Department of the Air Force

The Director of Intelligence, Headquarters, Marine Corps

The National Foreign Intelligence Board concurs.

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Key Judgments

Dramatic changes in approach to the West under Soviet leader Gorbachev are driven by economic and social decay at home, a widening technological gap with the West, and a growing realism about trends in the outside world. For the foreseeable future, the USSR will remain the West's principal adversary. But the process Gorbachev has set in motion is likely to change the nature of the Soviet challenge over the next five years or so:

- New Soviet policies will threaten the security consensus developed in the West to combat Soviet expansionism.
- The Soviets are likely to succeed to a degree in undercutting support abroad for defense programs and in reducing political barriers to Western participation in their economic development.
- At the same time new policies will make Moscow more flexible on regional issues and human rights and pave the way for a potentially significant reduction of the military threat.
- Alliance cohesion will decline faster in the Warsaw Pact than in NATO, giving the East Europeans much greater scope for change.

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We believe Moscow wants to shift competition with the West to a largely political and economic plane. In order to prepare the ground for such a shift, Soviet leaders are making major policy changes and promoting a broad reassessment of the West.

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These new policies serve domestic as well as foreign policy needs:

- They aim to create an international environment more conducive to domestic reform and to undermine the rationale for high defense budgets and repressive political controls.
- They are seen as more effective than past policies in advancing Soviet foreign interests.

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There are limits on how far the new Soviet leadership wants to go in the direction of a less confrontational East-West relationship:

- Vigorous efforts to protect and advance Soviet geopolitical interests and selective support for Communist regimes and revolutionary movements will continue.
- Moscow will continue to employ active measures and covert efforts to advance its objectives. Foreign intelligence activity is likely to increase.

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Given the turmoil unleashed by the reform process, we cannot predict policy trends during the period of the Estimate with high confidence. Nevertheless, we believe that Gorbachev is likely to stay in power and that the reform effort is more likely than not to continue. If so, we believe the following developments are probable:

- *Military power.* While increasing so far under Gorbachev, Soviet defense spending will decline significantly in real terms. Moscow will maintain vigorous force modernization programs and a strong R&D effort in key areas, but production and procurement of many major weapons will decline. Gorbachev is likely to make further concessions to achieve a START agreement, show flexibility on chemical weapons, and take further steps to trim and redeploy Soviet conventional forces—moving unilaterally if necessary.
- *The Western Alliance.* Moscow will attempt to translate its more benign image into expanded credits, trade, and technology sales and reduced support for defense spending and force modernization in Western Europe. While trying to reduce US influence and military presence, Moscow does not see an abrupt unraveling of current Alliance arrangements as serving Soviet interests.
- *Third World competition.* The Soviets will seek to expand their influence and continue support to leftist causes deemed to have some future. But they will be more careful to consider how such moves affect broader Soviet interests, including relations with the West. They will encourage their clients to make economic and political reforms and seek Western aid. It is highly unlikely that Moscow will become directly involved in military support to another leftist seizure of power in the Third World as it did in the 1970s.

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Alternative Scenarios

We see a number of developments that—while unlikely—could disrupt current trends and push Gorbachev onto a different course:

- A widespread crackdown on unrest at home or in Eastern Europe would probably trigger a reescalation of East-West tensions, causing Gorbachev to tack in a conservative direction. A shift of this sort would limit Gorbachev's freedom of maneuver in negotiations and his ability to transfer resources away from defense.
- Were nationality unrest to threaten central control or the territorial integrity of the country, we see a risk that the leadership would revert to more hostile rhetoric and policies toward the West in an attempt to reunify the country.

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Gorbachev's removal—unlikely but not to be ruled out—would have a significant impact:

- A more orthodox regime would slow the pace of change, be more supportive of military interests and leftist allies abroad, and eschew unilateral arms control concessions.
- We see little chance that a successor leadership would completely roll back Gorbachev's policies or revert to a major military buildup and aggressive policies in the Third World.

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Disagreements

There is general agreement in the Intelligence Community over the outlook for the next five to seven years, but differing views over the *longer term* prospects for fundamental and enduring change toward less competitive Soviet behavior:

- Some analysts see current policy changes as largely tactical, driven by the need for breathing space from the competition. They believe the ideological imperatives of Marxism-Leninism and its hostility toward capitalist countries are enduring. They point to previous failures of reform and the transient nature of past "detentes." They judge that there is a serious risk of Moscow returning to traditionally combative behavior when the hoped for gains in economic performance are achieved.
- Other analysts believe Gorbachev's policies reflect a fundamental re-thinking of national interests and ideology as well as more tactical considerations. They argue that ideological tenets of Marxism-Leninism such as class conflict and capitalist-socialist enmity are being revised. They consider the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the shift toward tolerance of power sharing in Eastern Europe to be historic shifts in the Soviet definition of national interest. They judge that Gorbachev's changes are likely to have sufficient momentum to produce lasting shifts in Soviet behavior.

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Indicators

As evidence of Moscow's progress over the next two to three years toward fulfilling the promise of more responsible behavior, we will be watching for:

- Soviet acceptance of real liberalization in Eastern Europe.
- Full implementation of announced force reductions.
- A substantial conversion in the defense industry to production for the civilian economy

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The Soviet World View in Flux

From the days of Lenin, Soviet policy toward the West has been shaped by a body of ideological dogma centered around negative images of the West and the necessity of a long-term struggle by the "socialist camp" against the West. These tenets have pictured the West as in an inevitable state of decline and forced relentlessly toward militarization to shore up its position. They have depicted East-West relations as based on unrelenting class struggle, leaving little or no common ground for cooperation.

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Tensions in Moscow over how far to go in seeking accommodation with the West have been reflected in disputes over how much change is called for in this traditional world view:

- *Gorbachev and his reform-minded allies believe that significant revisions are required to provide a long-term basis for a less conflictual relationship with the West—a shift they believe is essential to their efforts to modernize the country. They argue that capitalism remains in a robust state of health, that it is not inherently militaristic, and that the West can rise above a narrow class-based approach to relations with the Communist Bloc. While reaffirming the continuing relevance of class analysis, they are seeking to diminish the centrality of class conflict to East-West relations and assert the overriding importance of "universal human values."*
- *More orthodox leaders, such as senior party secretary Ligachev, accept the need for reduced tensions with the West and for some ideological adjustments. But they are skeptical about the feasibility of seeking a fundamentally less conflictual relationship and believe a more limited accommodation will suffice. They believe the reformers are going too far in tampering with fundamental tenets of socialism and are resisting the effort to revise traditional notions about class struggle, capitalism and the threat it poses, and the nature of the East-West relationship.*

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We believe that, over the longer term, the most reliable guarantees of enduring change will be in the institutionalization of a more open society and relationship with the outside world:

- The establishment of a more pluralistic and open decisionmaking process on foreign policy and defense issues.
- Progress toward the rule of law and a significant relaxation of barriers to free travel and emigration.

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